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**Comprehension as Social and Intellectual Practice:
Rebuilding Curriculum in Low Socioeconomic and Cultural Minority Schools**

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Abstract

This article reframes the concept of comprehension as a social and intellectual practice. It reviews current approaches to reading instruction for linguistically and culturally diverse, Indigenous and low socioeconomic (SES) students, noting an emphasis on comprehension as autonomous skills. The four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) is used to make the case for integrating comprehension instruction with an emphasis on student cultural and community knowledge, and substantive intellectual and sociocultural content in elementary school curricula. Illustrations are drawn from our research on literacy in a low SES primary school.

Introduction

John Dewey (1910/1997) described comprehension as a thinking process for seeking meaning when there is perplexity, a lack of understanding, or absence of sense. Human learning and expression is thereby understood as problem-solving action to render the world coherent (Dewey, 1934). In this article we detail our view that comprehension is a cognitive *but also* social and intellectual phenomenon, and that narrow understandings of comprehension are insufficient for literacy education for diverse and marginalised students. This is nothing less than an issue of redistributive social justice (Luke, Iyer, & Doherty, 2010; Woods, 2009).

One consequence of the *No Child Left Behind* implementation – and similar initiatives in Australia and the UK – has been a resurgence of deficit discourse (e.g., McCarty, 2009). Individual and group risk factors for comprehension outcomes have been posited, including ‘disrupted’ or ‘abnormal’ development, home language other than English or non-standard dialect, and low SES (Snow, Burns, & Griffith, 1998; August & Shanahan, 2008).

Achievement problems have been attributed to low “teacher quality” (Little & Bartlett, 2010) and “politically correct” approaches, code words for any pedagogy labelled “progressive” or “critical” (Snyder, 2008). Programs with a putatively ‘scientific’ basis and centrally scripted teacher behaviour and interactional style are the preferred policy solution in the U.S. and UK. Our focus here is on comprehension instruction for students from cultural and linguistic minority, Indigenous and low SES backgrounds. Evidence of *sustained* and *longitudinal* achievement gains for these students remains elusive (Luke & Woods, 2009). We use the four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) to make the case for adapting comprehension instruction for the students. Our argument is that *autonomous* models (Street, 1984) of skill acquisition – whether decoding or comprehension – stop short of addressing the students’ need for substantive cultural content and engagement with the social texts and intellectual demands of everyday community life and institutional and social action. We argue that substantive intellectual content and visible connections to the world are keys to sustainable achievement. Reporting on our curriculum work with a low SES school, we conclude by calling for integration and adaptation of conventional approaches to comprehension instruction with substantive curricular foci on community cultural content and knowledge of social fields and disciplinary discourses.

Comprehension and Equity Outcomes

Historically, ‘comprehension’ has denoted reader ‘understanding’. The cognitive and linguistic turns in the 1960/70s initiated important investigations of reader cognitive processes and linguistic competences for constructing and representing meanings. The reports of national panels in the U.S., UK and Australia at the turn of the century led to a policy focus on early instruction in decoding skills (e.g., Snow et al., 1998; National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000). However, there remains a consensus across curriculum and disciplinary fields that comprehension – variously defined – is essential. Current emphasis on phonics notwithstanding, comprehension remains the longitudinal goal of school reading instruction.

Although the centrality of comprehension is well established, Walter MacGinitie and Ruth MacGinitie’s (1986) observations stand: in many classrooms comprehension is routinely assessed rather than explicitly taught. Further, we argue, there is a pressing need for attention to substantive community, cultural and disciplinary knowledge bases that are often neglected

in programs of autonomous comprehension strategies and skills (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009).

Many current approaches view meaning as constructed ‘in the reader’s head’ or internal cognitive space (Connelly, Johnston & Thompson, 2004). Concepts of ‘risk’ and ‘lack’ in this regard are central in longstanding discourses of deficit (e.g., Skinner, Bryant, Coffman, & Campbell, 1998; Luke & Goldstein, 2006). Yet, developmental psychologist David Olson (2002) notes that achievement differences may stem not from deep differences in ability or competence but from limited engagement with differences between schooling and students’ everyday lives and cultures. Effective intercultural and sociocultural reading education aims to create a ‘meeting of minds’ (McNaughton, 2002). In these accounts, instruction begins from an acknowledgement of diverse ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and the cultural and community bases of students’ existing textual and knowledge resources (Dyson, 1999). Whether we work from cognitive or sociocultural models of reading, it is axiomatic that instruction mindfully engages with the prior knowledge and experience, interactional patterns, and the variable needs of diverse student learners (Clay, 1998) – in effect, building bridges from the known to the new.

This highlights the place of intercultural and sociocultural interventions that focus on improved comprehension outcomes. In early work on reciprocal teaching, Palincsar and Brown (1984) demonstrated that student comprehension can be reconceptualized and reshaped through alterations in face-to-face activity structures around texts. Lai and colleagues’ (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner, & Hsiao, 2009) work with Maori and Pacifica students in South Auckland schools seeks continuity of activities between home and school to optimize direct comprehension instruction. Reciprocal teaching and strategy instruction can be used to help students from diverse backgrounds unlock the unfamiliar and engage with the specialized textual demands of schooling. Cognitive and psycholinguistic approaches to comprehension can be brought together with substantial engagement with (1) student cultural and linguistic resources and (2) rich, culturally relevant and intellectually demanding themes, topics, and field knowledge. The key to sustainable student gains, the Lai et al. (2009) study indicates, is not in specific comprehension packages, but in development of rich, relevant and sustainable cross-disciplinary programs based on teacher cultural understanding and professional/technical knowledge about comprehension. Our point here is that we need to augment and adopt programs of explicit instruction in comprehension

strategies to generate the intellectual and cultural re-engagement with schooling requisite for sustainable achievement and improved academic pathways.

Reararticulating Comprehension in the Four Resources Model

In the current policy environment and in many instructional settings, comprehension often denotes skills, strategies, and processes that are set in opposition to those of decoding. Since the late 1980s these strategic processes have been the focus of considerable activity, resulting in a proliferation of methods or approaches for teaching comprehension as an agentive meaning-making, cognitive process. Programs typically attend to the purposes, content knowledge and cognitive and metacognitive strategies readers bring to text. Evidence has been cited in major reviews of reading and literacy (e.g., Snow et al., 1998) to support strategy instruction. However, a recent two year quasi-experimental study by McKeown, Beck and Blake (2009) begins to question the priority accorded strategies. The study found that low SES fifth graders engaged with “content instruction” that focused on open questions about text meaning, outperformed students exposed to strategies instruction on measures of narrative and expository learning. Transfer effects, extended talk about text, and the length of student responses were also superior.

How might we adapt current approaches to comprehension instruction that engages with substantive intellectual and community content? Here we use the four resources model (Freebody & Luke, 1990) as a heuristic. The model was developed at a time when single method solutions to literacy problems were proliferating, accompanied by a divisive rhetoric about ‘old and wrong’ and ‘new and best’ methods (Luke & Freebody, 1999). The intent was to both validate effective classroom literacy practices and promote their ongoing development.

The four resources model outlines a repertoire of practices required to engage in literate societies: coding, semantic, pragmatic/interactional, and critical/text analytic. The model is not an instructional script or program, but a framework for examining focus and balance in curriculum and instruction. It does not provide programmatic guidelines for which combination of practices *ought* to be deployed. Rather, it enables teachers to analyse community cultural and linguistic context, student resources and needs, developmental age/stage, and educational goals. The aim is to map the breadth of an individual or community’s literate practices, the depth of control of these, and the extent to which texts are transformed or redesigned within them. The model is widely used in the U.S., Canada, UK,

New Zealand, Australia, and East Asia and has been adopted for application in mathematics, ICT, social studies, and science curricula (e.g., Underwood, Yoo, & Pearson, 2007; Brandt, 2008).

To establish the place of comprehension in the model, we briefly detail the four resources. Breaking the code of texts requires knowledge of and familiarity with textual regularities and conventions. To take up *code breaker* practices the individual must know about patterns of and relationships between semiotic codes – spoken, written, visual, and multimodal. To take up *text participant/meaning maker* practices requires competence in connecting texts’ semiotic systems to reader background knowledge, experiences, and understandings – an epistemological connection with cultural ways of seeing. The emphasis here is not just on ‘meaning’ per se, but on “connectedness” to everyday and scientific worlds (Newmann and Associates, 1996), on using texts to construct possible meanings, and making links to other social and textual worlds. To use texts pragmatically requires tacit and explicit understandings of institutional dynamics, rituals, constraints, and possibilities of text use. Understanding that purpose and participants shape the ways texts are structured, their formality and tenor, and their generic features are all key to *text user* practices. To critique or ‘analyse’ texts begins from the premise that all texts are value-laden actions that attempt to ‘do something’ to readers. Their truth claims aside, all texts position, define, and influence people’s ideas and opinions in particular normative directions, with interests and intents. Texts have ideological bases, biases, and standpoints, and *text analysts* can identify the ways in which texts bid to define the world, position and, potentially, manipulate readers.

Comprehension does not necessarily entail verification of literal and inferred meanings, but critical analyses of their possible origins, motivations, and consequences through understanding of semiotic codes and pragmatic and interactional conventions. This perspective allows us to move beyond conventional definitions of comprehension (e.g., Snow et al., 1998) to a definition that includes but is not limited to cognitive processes for bringing past experiences to reading and for constructing, retaining and recalling meaning with a degree of fidelity to the semantic contents of a given text. By this definition, comprehension is in the first instance a cultural phenomenon, in so far as cultural standpoint, taken-for-granted disciplinary knowledge and content, along with shared perspectives, are necessarily in play (Kintsch & Greene, 1978). Second, it is a social phenomenon, insofar as readers ‘do comprehension’ both through interactional display and deployment of meanings in literacy events (Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991). Third, it is a political and intellectual phenomenon,

insofar as it entails entry into ideologically and culturally-based ‘readings’ or sociohistorical scripts (Cole, 1996; Woods & Henderson, 2008) for understanding social worlds, everyday and technical knowledges, values, and beliefs.

If, as the ideological model of literacy holds (Street, 1984), we read in ways constrained and defined, enabled and afforded by contexts, then we read and make meaning not only through the reader/text interaction and cognitive processes described in traditional reading research, but also through entry into institutional contexts and social fields of exchange where texts are used. This necessarily requires a “reading of the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1982) and a “goal-seeking” (Wilden, 1981) engagement with substantive knowledge. Reading intellectually demanding disciplinary content in relation to world and community knowledges calls forth code breaking, text use and text analytic practice that is not necessarily required in autonomous comprehension instruction. Therefore the four resources model raises questions about what counts as comprehension, in relation to what types of texts, and for which readers. We define comprehension, then, as a lived and institutionally situated social, cultural and intellectual practice that is much more than a semantic element of making meaning from text.

Work in Progress: Whole School Elementary School Literacy Curriculum Planning

To illustrate, we offer a brief account of our current research on literacy education at a primary school in a low SES community in an Australian city. The local area is classified in the lowest quartile of communities by combined indicators of socioeconomic position, with many children coming from families that are third generation unemployed. It has an overall enrolment of about 560 students, with approximately a quarter of these Australian Indigenous students and migrant students of English as a Second Language/Dialect. At any given grade-level, approximately 15-20% of the student cohort receives specialized learning support.

We have completed the first year of a four-year Australian Research Council-funded research grant that brings together teachers and administration with a team of literacy researchers with the shared aim of sustainable improvements in literacy and overall school achievement. The two focal points of our intervention to date are on: (1) implementation of a digital arts production program to re-engage middle years students in learning; and (2) development of a coherent whole school literacy program using the four resources model. The work we report here is preliminary, based on our initial planning and observation and intervention phases with teachers and students.

A concern of administration and teachers alike was that explicit instruction in comprehension was not occurring in many classes. This was corroborated in our classroom observations. Although there is no longitudinal cohort data, the general trends indicate that many students who are achieving functional levels of decoding in the first three years of school encounter problems in subsequent, comprehension-based assessments. This is typical of low SES primary schools in Australia. In talking with teachers, we heard little of substantive content relating to students' lives outside of school. There was little explicit connection to the Aboriginal community knowledge and engagement resource program, few linkages with other curriculum fields, or 'hitching' of the autonomous skills emphases with innovation in digital and multimodal media. Moreover, there was a degree of student compliance that stood in contrast to the critical intellectual engagement we observed in extra-curricular settings. This is something more than the "narrowing of the curriculum" described in qualitative descriptions on the effects of *No Child Left Behind* (Nicholls, Glass, & Berliner, 2005). Autonomous skills models (Street, 1984) are 'autonomous' not only in their theoretical and practical framing, but also in isolating literacy instruction from the rest of school curriculum and from students' community and service learning. This triangulates with an overall decline in "intellectual demand" and "connectedness" or visible "value beyond school" (Newmann and Associates, 1996), a widespread phenomenon that has been established in large-scale observational studies in Australia (e.g., Lingard et al. 2001; Ladwig & Gore, 2005). These studies corroborated a core claim of the four resources model: while basic, autonomous skills are necessary for progress, their achievement is not sufficient for sustained achievement gains among equity groups.

After discussion, the school has expanded the teaching of comprehension. Cognitive and metacognitive strategies are being explicitly taught in many more classrooms and we have observed students completing strategies exercises for homework. There is preliminary evidence that this is having effects on reading outcomes. However, placing strategies as the central foci, without attention to content, has meant that in some classrooms at least instruction remains insular, with little evidence of transfer of reading skills or expanded classroom talk around texts – two key elements of the McKeown, Beck, and Blake (2009) and the Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner, and Hsiao (2009) studies.

Rethinking Comprehension: Why Substantive Content Matters

As we begin supporting the school staff to rework the whole school literacy program, our position is that for students from culturally diverse or marginalized backgrounds, content

matters in crucial ways. In a recent reanalysis of achievement test score impacts of comprehension programs, Slavin and colleagues (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung & Davis, 2009) note improved test score effects of comprehension-based curriculum and instruction. Yet we need to cautiously scrutinize the logic of policy applications of such analyses (Luke, Green, & Kelly, 2010). The key policy assumption is that small but statistically significant test score gains will generate sustainable academic achievement gains and improved pathway outcomes for at-risk students. This has common-sense appeal and we do not contest these findings. But the four resources model raises questions of necessity and sufficiency of autonomous skills – whether decoding or comprehension - for sustainable improvement of the educational outcomes.

We argue that direct instruction in comprehension, reciprocal teaching/strategy based instruction, can set the table for improved equity performance – but cannot in itself generate sustainable gains in achievement across the curriculum and improved longitudinal engagement and participation levels. What is required, Newmann and Associates (1966) have shown, is sustained engagement with substantive knowledge, visible links to both the phenomenal and social world outside of school, and sustained classroom discourse around curriculum/field/disciplinary knowledge. This entails a close engagement with community knowledge and institutions, a “tuning up of the eyes and ears” (Heath, 1983) to how literacy works in everyday life, social institutions, and a scaffolded and motivating engagement with the substantive intellectual fields of school subjects and world knowledge. This combination of links to students’ lives and worlds outside of school, and the use of literacy to engage with specialised knowledge required by the school, is a predominant feature of culturally-based and critical approaches to reading we have described here. Comprehension is a social practice for “reading the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1992) and for everyday social and cultural action in its institutions and fields.

There are profound dangers in ‘fixing’ school literacy with the superimposition of autonomous skill models that do not articulate with community knowledge and interests and substantive, intellectually challenging curriculum. Here, we have not outlined a particular method – but working principles for culturally inclusive and intellectually-demanding school curriculum planning. It is time to move beyond the simple binary policy debates – between phonics and comprehension, between implicit and explicit instruction, between community and canonical knowledge, between direct instruction and culturally-appropriate pedagogy, between local knowledge and scientific discipline – and begin a thorough qualitative re-

examination of those schools that have been successful at achievement of a more equitable and just education.

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